1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER TWO

THE HOMES OF THE LEPCHAS

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Zongu is a roughly triangular portion of very mountainous land, approximately forty miles on each side, bounded on the south-east by the river Teesta, on the north-east by the river Talung and on the third side by the mountains south of Kinchenjunga. The land is excessively precipitous; the rivers are at about 2,000 feet above sea-level and the average height of the hills is about 12,000 feet; but the peaks rise to more than double that height, Kinchenjunga at the head of the Talung valley, which dominates the western horizon, being over 28,000 feet. Except for a few artificially levelled places there is probably not a hundred square yards of flat ground in the whole district; and the tracks are too steep and too uneven for it to be possible to employ mules, let alone horses; all travelling has to be done on foot, and all goods transported by human porterage.

The river valleys are hot, steamy and somewhat malarious, and consequently there are no houses right on the river, though the ground is used for raising subtropical plants; there are however occasional houses about 500 feet higher up. Most of the houses and cultivated land are between 3,500 feet and 7,500 feet above sea-level, a relatively narrow band above the two rivers, though occasionally fields are made at even higher altitudes. Above the cultivated land is the forest in which wild produce is gathered, a decreasing amount of hunting done, and to which the cattle are sent up to pasture in the winter months. Above the forest level comes first the rhododendron forest, and then the snows, rarely visited except by hunters searching either for ibex and musk-deer or for the wild aconite which forms the basis of their arrow poison.

The climate of the Talung valley is excessively wet, even for the Himalayas; it is only in the autumn months—from the end of September to the end of November—that there is no rain.

1: Gorer J-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

During the rest of the year it falls intermittently, and in the full monsoon period, June to September, almost continuously. Owing to the precipitous nature of the land water does not lie, and the ground will be dry within six hours of a heavy downpour. In Zongu there are a great number of mountain streams running down from the snows to the rivers.

The temperature varies very considerably at the different heights. Only once in this century has snow fallen down by the river; that was in 1906. Above about 8,000 feet snow lies regularly every year, and there are often powderings of snow down to about 4,000 feet, the level of most of the houses; but the presence of oranges and peaches suggests that at this level snow and frost are neither severe nor continuous. Except for the warm and clammy monsoon period, when dysentery epidemics are liable to break out, the weather is generally cool on the habitation level, and there is considerable difference between day and night temperatures. Judging from the weather I did experience and the comparisons made I should say that the mean temperature varies between about 40 degrees Fahrenheit in winter to about 86 in summer. It follows that clothes are very necessary for warmth.

Both men and women wear thin knee-length drawers, and on the upper body a shirt; men's shirts are slightly shorter. Over this women also wear a sort of bodice made out of a thin material, formerly obtained from Assam through Bhutan. The original Lepcha outside dress was a thick piece of home-woven striped material, fastened over one shoulder with a brooch, belted at the waist with a sash and reaching to the knees. The colouring of this sash has a certain significance, those of lamas[1] usually being yellow and of laymen red or purple, though other colours are sometimes used. Within the last generation women have completely given up this indigenous type of dress in favour of the Tibetan costume, which consists of a coloured long-sleeved under-bodice, and a dark sleeveless overdress, reaching half-way down the calves and fastened with buttons. Women often tie up their hair with a head-cloth, generally resembling a dirty table napkin. Quite a number

[1] Lama is not a Lepcha word. The Lepchas call lamas either *yook-mun*—this means honoured Mun, that is 'honoured priest of the Lepcha Mun religion'—or more generally *cho-bu* which means 'book man' since the essential part of the lamaist education is reading, a talent not enjoyed by the layman. I have thought it better however to use the word 'lama' as it is already familiar to western readers in its meaning of priest of the Tibetan lamaist religion.

2: Morris T-5 (1937)1938 AK5 Lepcha AK5

CHAPTER 2

Himalayan Hotch-potch: an Anthology of Sikkim

The country.

"SIKKIM—Native State in the Eastern Himalayas, with an area of 2,818 square miles. It is bounded on the north and east by Tibet; on the south-east by Bhutan; and on the south by Darjeeling District; and on the west by Nepal. The Tibetan name for Sikkim is pronounced Denjong, and more rarely Demjong or Demoshong; and the people are called *Rong-pa*, or 'dwellers in the valleys,' the term *Mom-pa*, or 'dwellers in the low country,' being used occasionally to describe the Lepcha inhabitants."

Gazetteer of India, Vol. 22. 1908.

The climate.

"The climate varies between the tropical heat of the valleys and the Alpine cold of the snowy ranges. The rainfall is very heavy, averaging 137 inches annually at Gangtok. From November to February the rainfall is light, and the weather in November and December is clear and fine. In March thunderstorms commence and, growing more and more frequent, usher in the rainy season, which lasts till October."

Ibid.

Encouragement for the timid traveller.

"Even in the most remote regions of Sikkim one's personal safety is assured, for the inhabitants are a peaceful and hospitable folk, and on this point even the most nervous need have no fear. Ladies travelling by themselves may undertake expeditions to the furthermost bungalows, without being subjected to the least inconvenience, their *sirdar* or headman always regarding their protection as his own personal charge.

7: Hooker D-5 (1849-1851) 1854.
AK5 Lepcha AK5

Dorjiling: from its summit Chumulari (23,929 feet) is 133
seen to the north-east, at eighty-four miles distance, rearing its head as a great rounded mass over the snowy Chola range, out of which it appears to rise, although in reality lying forty miles beyond;—so deceptive is the perspective of snowy mountains. To the north-west again, at upwards of 100 miles distance, a beautiful group of snowy mountains rises above the black Singalelah range, the chief being, perhaps, as high as Kinchinjunga, from which it is fully eighty miles distant to the westward; and between them no mountain of considerable altitude intervenes; the Nepalese Himalaya in that direction sinking remarkably towards the Arun river, which there enters Nepal from Tibet.

The top of Sinchul is a favourite excursion from Dorjiling, being very easy of access, and the path abounding in rare and beautiful plants, and passing through magnificent forests of oak, magnolia, and rhododendron; while the summit, besides embracing this splendid view of the snowy range over the Dorjiling spur in the foreground, commands also the plains of India, with the courses of the Teesta, Mahanuddee, Balasun and Mechi rivers. In the months of 133
April and May, when the magnolias and rhododendrons are 137
in blossom, the gorgeous vegetation is, in some respects, not to be surpassed by anything in the tropics; but the effect is [132]●
much marred by the prevailing gloom of the weather. The white-flowered magnolia (*M. excelsa*, Wall,) forms a predominant tree at 7000 to 8000 feet; and in 1848 it blossomed so profusely, that the forests on the broad flanks of Sinchul, and other mountains of that elevation, appeared as if sprinkled with snow. The purple-flowered kind again 137
(*M. Campbellii*) hardly occurs below 8000 feet, and forms an immense, but very ugly, black-barked, sparingly branched